

You've got Mail

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Ray Johnson

NOT NOTHING
Selected writings, 1954–1994

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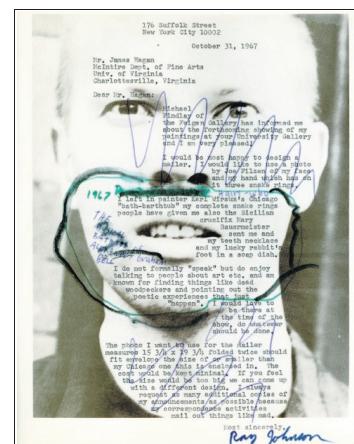
be prompting new poetic challenges.

Johnson himself did not live to witness the advent of email and the internet, much less the social media. He used an ordinary typewriter, striking out and typing over errors as he went along, and enhanced his verbal messages with image fragments, graphics, drawings, black quasi alphabetic glyphs, and scraps of commercial packaging – whatever came to hand – before mailing the results to a select circle of friends and acquaintances. By the mid-1950s, Johnson had some 200 regular correspondents, who were urged to forward the messages to others: the “New York Correspondance School”, as it was called, aimed to popularize the New York School aesthetic by aligning it with the then ubiquitous correspondence schools (the forerunners of our own Distance Learning online courses) that offered courses in anything from electrical repair and stenog-

In the art world, Ray Johnson (1927–1995) has long been a cult figure, especially since 2002 when John Walter and Andrew Moore produced their documentary film *How to Draw a Bunny* – a touching account of Johnson’s lifelong effort to renew familiar art forms (painting, collage, performance art, graffiti). As a poet, on the other hand, Johnson is virtually unknown. Kevin Killian, in his essay included in *Not Nothing*, admits that he knew little about Ray Johnson before receiving this commission, confusing him with the poet Ronald Johnson, who, however different in sensibility, embodied similar queer values and used comparable erasure techniques. Both *The Paper Snake*, a facsimile of the Fluxus artist Dick Higgins’s inventive 1965 assemblage of ephemera received from Johnson, and *Not Nothing*, a generous and beautifully produced selection of the artist’s “mail art” and related writings, testify to a preoccupation with language that allies Johnson to the Black Mountain poets (he attended the college from 1945–48, studied with Joseph Albers, and later John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Allen Kaprow), especially Robert Creeley, as well as to such later minimalists as Vito Acconci and Aram Saroyan.

Johnson’s early collage works which he called “moticos” – the word is an anagram of “osmotic”, referring to the liquid flow between two semi-permeable membranes – intersperse language games involving overtype (like the “TIDBIT” series, where one can always make out the word “tidbit” beneath any number of verbal-visual “covers”) with his signature glyphs – the Lucky Strike logo, the bunny head, the paper snake, the “bat-tub”. The moticos graced the walls of such transient galleries as Tender Buttons, on the Upper East Side, where Johnson was known to stage, for a select group of friends, his happenings called “Nothings” – Cagean events at which whatever the audience happened to do became the performance. The imagery of the moticos is sometimes cluttered, more Pop comic strip than Joseph Cornell, whom Johnson considered, along with Marcel Duchamp, his master. The artist, highly self-critical, discarded many: indeed, in 1954–55, he held a “cremation” in Cy Twombly’s fireplace. But, as these two books suggest, Johnson’s writing may, in the end, be more lasting than his visual images. The “moth ball” valentines and what seem like proto-tweets – “I am now / in my frog / legs frogs / leg period” or “I went to the sea and peed and kept peeing and a mermaid threw a big green turd at me” – are juxtaposed to mock catalogues and playlets that have retained their charm.

But it is Mail Art, with its strong ties to Conceptualism, that makes Johnson, its founding father, so interesting to a current generation of poets which is experimenting with variants such as Twitter poetry. There exist many anthologies of poetry-tweets, featuring such rhyming stanzas as “Take control, power of will / Dig a hole, climb that hill. / Target a goal, patience nil. / Pay the toll, struggle still”, or “twaikus” such as “Beneath the morning sun / The city is painted gold / People move like bees through honey”. At a time when most conventionally printed poetry observes no rules except lineation, the 140-character Twitter limit may



From *Not Nothing: Selected writings by Ray Johnson, 1954–1994*

raphy to life drawing. The “mail art” disseminated by Johnson’s Correspondance School (he insisted on spelling it with an “a”, perhaps in an allusion to Baudelaire’s *correspondances*), was thus conceived as a democratic, egalitarian alternative to the mainstream gallery system: here anyone might (and did) take part in what was a participatory art movement. All that was needed was a US postage stamp.

Typically, Johnson’s mail art pieces used “found” business stationery, purportedly to avoid waste but also for their collage potential. Thus a little lyric for Carol Berge bears the letterhead “Department of Housing and Building, City of New York” and the seal of Edward T. Crinnion, First Deputy Commissioner.

Dated January 17, 1965, it is labelled “VERY IMPORTANT” (anticipating the subject-line of email):

Carol Berge,
After saying goodbye to you
on the crosstown bus –
I found thrown away
a tall black bar chair
with three legs –
one leg missing.
I carried it home.
I washed my hands
in warm water.
They were so cold.
Red Eyes

At first reading, this casual ditty, written in the vein of the “I do this, I do that” poems of Johnson’s contemporary Frank O’Hara, seems inconsequential. But readers familiar with William Carlos Williams will recognize it as an allusion to the latter’s famous plum poem (“This is just to say”), which concludes with the lines “Forgive me / they were delicious / so sweet / and so cold”. Johnson, who loved far-fetched metonymies, seems to be identifying the missing leg of the tall black bar chair with his own hands, so cold he must put them under warm water. And the sense of cold is carried over into the signature “Red Eyes”.

Other mail art pieces are more topical. A letter-poem dated 1.11.62, addressed to A and D (the Fluxus artist Alison Knowles and her husband Dick Higgins), begins with the line “Also by Simone de Beauvoir” and proceeds



with a jumbled list of Beauvoir works – “Memoirs of a dutiful daughter / The long march / Blood of others / She came to stay / America day by day / Must we burn de Sade? / The second sex / The mandarins” – only to shift abruptly to pharmaceutical and medical items that require “A violet ray lamp in small leather case”:

An examination of the effects of love-making
on the heart.
Suppose you are working on a case of athlete’s foot and the boy next in line has a strawberry or cut. Here is a case where you need to rinse your hands with germicidal, fungicidal Iso-Quin before you move on to these new open wounds. Don’t be a spreader of infection.

He that flings dirt upon another dirties himself most.

This letter, composed two decades before the first AIDS cases were identified, uncannily looks ahead to a time when the sexual feelings and relationships analysed so solemnly in *The Mandarins* and *The Second Sex*, may require a very different response. “LOVE MAKING”, as the pasted-in headline puts it, “CAN KILL YOU”.

In creating such appropriative texts, Johnson anticipates the conceptual writings of our own moment; for example, what we might call the faux-interview – an interview composed of non-sequiturs. In “13 Questions of December, 1963”, the art critic David Bourdon poses a series of specific questions about artists and media. The mimeographed text contains numerous typos and is cut off at the right margin so that the reader has to fill in the missing words – a situation ironic in view of the numerical exactitude demanded by most of the questions. “#2”, for example, asks “For what reasons have you seldom strayed beyond the bounds [of] the 7 ½ by 11 inch collage?” To which Johnson replies, “My kitchen sink is twenty inches wide and the metal rule I used to measure it with was cold to the touch”. And the responses continue in this vein. In “#5”, the bottom margin of Bourdon’s page is cut off so that it reads as follows: “One of the more diverting ‘formal extensions’ of collage is the ‘happening.’ You have been closely involved in ‘happenings,’ but you have invented something like a closet happening, which you call a ‘nothing.’ I know you do not . . .”. And the text breaks off. Below it, in different typeface, Johnson has provided the response, “Open a closet door close a closet door”, which takes on an oddly apropos ring for a twenty-first-century reader.

Not all of Johnson’s works have such resonance. By the early 1990s, the closet door was evidently beginning to close in on him. The former avid New Yorker had moved to Locust Valley, Long Island, where he lived as a recluse and produced only driblets of mail art. On January 13, 1995, he was seen dressed in black, diving off a bridge in Sag Harbor and backstroking out to sea. As his art world friends were to discover, even his suicide had a conceptual aura, involving, as it did, the number 13: the date, his age, 67 (6 + 7 = 13), as well as the room number of the motel he had checked into earlier that day, 247 (2 + 4 + 7).

A few years before his suicide (January 22, 1990), Johnson sent out a postcard with the bold lettering, “NO VIRGINIA THER/E ISN’T ANY SUC/MAILING LIST”. Lonely and depressed, he was still making the most of the everyday material that came across his desk. The postmark “No [Northern] Virginia” gave him his opener, he covered the “P” of the familiar “Pray for Peace” stamp with his bunny logo, thus declaring himself a “ray for peace”, and the postage stamp itself, under the American flag printed on standard US postcards at the time, is of Yosemite – an emblem of the freedom of the Wild West. There’s always, Johnson liked to think until he could no longer think it, hope for tomorrow. Twenty years after his death, there are signs that Johnson’s mailing list might be in for recycling.